

## Chapter Submission for Special Issue *Jesuits as Counsellors*

**Title:**

**“Knowledge and Counsel in Giovanni Botero’s *Ragion di Stato*”**

**Author:** Dr. Harald E. Braun

**Institution:** University of Liverpool, UK

**Address of Editor:**

Dr. Harald E. Braun ([h.e.braun@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:h.e.braun@liverpool.ac.uk)), 3 Killingbeck Close, Burscough, L40 7UW, United Kingdom

### **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between knowledge, political counsel and reason of state in Giovanni Botero ((1544-1617). Botero is primarily known as the champion of Catholic reason of state, mainly on account of his treatise *Ragion di Stato*. I argue that Botero marks a watershed in the history of European political thought not because of his response to Machiavelli, but on account of his conscious and innovative integration of different field of knowledge into a new language of the state. He is the first to capture convincingly the reality of the Counter-Reformation State and European global expansion. While Botero writes with a view to serve the universal church and Catholic secular princes, his language transcends confessional boundaries. This argument is made with reference to *Delle cause della grandezza delle città* (1588) and *Ragion di Stato* (1589), though it could be extended into his *Le relazioni universali* (1591-96).

### **Keywords**

Botero – Reason of State – Counsel – *Ragion di Stato* – *Delle cause della grandezza delle città* – Knowledge – Political Science – Machiavelli – Catholicism

## Knowledge and Counsel in Giovanni Botero's *Ragion di Stato*<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, Giovanni Botero (1544-1617) was primarily known as the ideological father of 'Catholic' as opposed to 'Machiavellian' reason of state - on account mainly of his *Della Ragion di Stato* first published in Venice in 1589.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship, though, has taken us well beyond the confines of the debate about 'Machiavellianism' and 'anti-Machiavellianism' in Botero and ever deeper into his intellectual universe. It has become increasingly clear that a narrow understanding of reason of state as knowing when and how to violate the legal, constitutional and ethical norms for pragmatic political reasons does not do justice to Botero's analysis of early modern statehood.<sup>3</sup> As a result, he is increasingly recognized as a transformative political thinker and his work as a watershed in the history of political thought.<sup>4</sup>

Romain Descendre, for instance, presents Botero as the acute observer of the rise of the territorial state, the Counter-Reformation, and the new global reality of the universal church.<sup>5</sup> John M. Headley draws out the secular and secularising tendencies in Botero's discussion of the territorial

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Simon Ditchfield, John H. Elliott, and Harro Höpfl for their very helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> For a view of Botero as primarily concerned with 'the problem of Machiavelli', see, for instance, Robert Bireley, *The Counter-Reformation Prince. Anti-Machiavellianism or Catholic Statecraft in Early Modern Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), chapter 3; Stéphane Bonnet, "Botero machiavélien ou l'invention de la raison d'État", *Les Études philosophiques* 66 (2003), 315-29; John M. Najemy, "Political Ideas", in Guido Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 384-402, 399-400.

<sup>3</sup> For a perceptive discussion of the complex relationship between Machiavelli, anti-Machiavellianism, and reason of state, see Harro Höpfl, *Jesuit Political Thought. The Society of Jesus and the State, c.1540-1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially chapters seven and eight; or the contributions in Yves C. Zarka (ed.), *Raison et déraison d'état: théoriciens et théories de la raison d'État aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> John M. Headley captures this trend when he refers to Botero as "possibly the first oceanographer, the first demographer, and (...) first expositor of urban studies", Review of Romain Descendre, *L'État de Monde: Giovanni Botero entre raison d'État et géopolitique*, *Renaissance Quarterly* 62 (2000), 1243-45, 1243.

<sup>5</sup> Romain Descendre, *L'État du monde: Giovanni Botero entre raison d'État et géopolitique* (Geneva: Droz, 2000). See also the classical studies by Luigi Firpo, *Scritti sul pensiero politico del Rinascimento e della Contrareforma*, ed. Enzo Baldini (Turin: UTET Università, 2005); and Aldo Albónico, *Il mondo americano di Giovanni Botero* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1990).

state as the engine of European global expansion.<sup>6</sup> Descendre and Headley both substantiate Botero's ambition and ability to offer new ways of analysing and comprehending early modern politics. They also open up new questions regarding the intellectual profile and ideological frame of Botero's writings.

For Descendre, Botero's political thought and writing were shaped by his long years in the service of Cardinal Federico Borromeo at the papal court in Rome. Those years - the period from c.1586 to c.1595 - clearly mark the most prolific period of his intellectual life, and saw the publication of his major political works: *Delle cause della grandezza delle città* (1588), *Della Ragion di Stato* (1589), and *Le relazioni universali* (published in four parts between 1591-96). According to Descendre, Botero's intellectual project during those years was to recover papal universalism by developing a contemporary, multi-layered and flexible notion of *Christianità* that mirrored the complexity of sixteenth-century politics.

Undoubtedly, the challenge of re-conceptualising the papal church with a view to early modern statehood, confessional conflict and global expansion was a major concern for Botero. It is most evident and coherently expressed, arguably, in *Le relazioni universali*.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is also a tangible and complementary determination to revise the language of statecraft *per se*. This is particularly manifest in the earlier *Ragion di Stato* and *Delle cause della grandezza delle città*. Both works disclose a definite desire to revise the language of practical political analysis and expand the knowledge on which it draws.

Botero was too much of an intellectual maverick - his independence of mind and sharp tongue frequently disconcerted his Jesuit superiors - to let his thinking be wholly absorbed by the challenges facing the papal church, even during his time at the curia. While inspired by the dynamic of state-building transforming papal territories during the period and harnessed in support of

---

<sup>6</sup> John M. Headley, 'Geography and Empire in the Late Renaissance. Botero's Assignment, Western Universalism, and the Civilizing Process', in *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000), 1119-55.

<sup>7</sup> Especially Part Four of *Le relazioni*, the last part published during Botero's lifetime (in 1596), which deals with indigenous religions and Catholic mission in the new world. The first two books are now available in a modern critical edition: Giovanni Botero, *Le Relazioni Universali*, ed. Blythe Alice Raviola (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2015).

universal Catholicism,<sup>8</sup> Botero's new language of statecraft - he adopts and adapts the label 'reason of state' – arises from an appreciation of new fields of knowledge and uses of knowledge. His exploration of commerce, labour, physical space and what would now be called demography and urban planning betrays a curiosity and a concern with knowledge and how it can be made useful for the body politic that is both fresh and not easily defined in strictly confessional terms. The result, I suggest, is a language of reason of state that ably serves the Catholic cause while effectively transcending confessional boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

This intellectual outlook and ambition was furnished and driven by personal experience gathered through considerable exposure to sixteenth century politics. After a period as a Jesuit and teacher of rhetoric - he left the Society under something of a cloud in 1580, but always remained close to his former brethren - Botero became secretary to the Borromeo cardinals of Milan, then counsellor to Duke Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy (1562 – 1630; reigned 1580 – 1630) and tutor to the Duke's older sons. It is this crucial and composite feature of his intellectual and professional identity – Botero the political counsellor *cum* secretary *cum* tutor – that motivates his aspiration to capture the whole of the early modern political experience in ways that would allow political decision-makers multiple points of entry and analysis.<sup>10</sup> *Ragion di Stato, Delle cause della grandezza delle città* and *Le relazioni universali* revolve around this desire to provide the kind of information and

---

<sup>8</sup> On the transformation of the papal state during the early modern period and the relationship between state-building and Catholic universalism, see, for instance, Paolo Prodi, *The Papal Prince: One Body and Two Souls: The Papal Monarchy in Early Modern Europe*, transl. by Susan Haskins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin, *Catholic Europe, 1592-1648: Centre and Peripheries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> I would qualify Descendre's proposition that "la période la plus prolifique (...) correspondant à la volonté de développer une pensée et un savoir politiques *authentiquement catholiques* [my emphasis]", *L'État de Monde*, 11. While Botero invariably sought to serve the Catholic cause, his new science of politics is in large parts rooted in observing nature and studying history, society and culture comparatively and in ways that effectively transcend confessional boundaries.

<sup>10</sup> Descendre, *L'État de Monde*, 10-11, identifies three discrete periods of intellectual endeavour and matching outputs: the years in the service of archbishop Carlo Borromeo (1580 to 1584) characterised by a concern with church reform ("logique pastorale"); the time at the Roman curia (1586-1595) in the household of cardinal Federico Borromeo ("logique politique"); finally, service at the Savoy court (after 1600) and emphasis on pedagogy ("logique didactique"). Arguably, Botero's curiosity about territorial rule and how it relates to Counter-Reformation and the global expansion of Christianity is linked to his ambition to instruct ecclesiastical and secular princes in the art of governing this entity. It predates his exclusion from the Society of Jesus (1580), becomes increasingly prevalent, and gives coherence to much of his work. In 1579, he fell out with Carlo Borromeo over his sermon on the whether or not Christ had held temporal power before Passion.

analysis that could feed straight into political decision-making and furnish princes with the means to respond to the crises and challenges of sixteenth-century government.<sup>11</sup> Botero not only pays close attention to current affairs and the political environment within which he and his employers moved. He also seeks to give political advice and advisors a new grounding by expanding the notion of *what is* political knowledge. In what follows, I will explore this complementarity of knowledge and counsel in Giovanni Botero, with reference mainly to *Ragion di Stato*.

\*\*\*

*Ragion di Stato* is a work of exploration and intelligence. The author conceived it as a mirror-of-princes, and at the same time resolved to change the content and outlook of the genre. He boldly acknowledges the fragmentation and differentiation of the early modern European political landscape in the wake of the European Reformation and Oceanic exploration and transfer of people, goods and knowledge. He revisits and in part re-shapes the language of statecraft in response. This he aims to do in two ways. He seeks both to pry into the 'secrets of empire' from diverse and wide-ranging sources of knowledge - including history, moral philosophy, nature, science and medicine, as well as personal experience – and to change the epistemic value of political analysis as a result.<sup>12</sup> In the process, he widens, differentiates and consolidates the understanding of what statecraft involves. The established themes and quandaries of sixteenth century political discourse – such as the importance of *riputazione* or the art of war in all its facets – remain constituent parts of the

---

<sup>11</sup> The list includes *Aggiunti di Gio* (1598) as well as the *Discorso della lega contro il Turco* (1614). His *De regia sapientia* (1583) and *Detti memorabilia di personaggi illustri* (1608) present a much more conventional and 'safe' perspective on politics and rulership..

<sup>12</sup> On early modern perceptions of nature as a source of politically relevant knowledge, see Pamela Long, *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), especially chapters five to seven; Pamela Smith, *The Business of Alchemy: Science and Culture in the Holy Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Vera Keller, "Mining Tacitus: Secrets of Empire, Nature and Art in the Reason of State", *The British Journal for the History of Science* 45.2 (2012), 189-212, especially 192-95.

discussion, yet find themselves arrayed alongside new information, questions and categories of analysis.

Botero defines reason of state as the knowledge – his term is *notitia* - necessary to “found, preserve or expand stable rule over people”.<sup>13</sup> Knowledge “of many things” will allow a prince to mould and shape the state, like the artisan who gives form to matter. The primary objective of using knowledge in this way is the preservation of *lo stato* itself. Here, in short, we have the two overarching themes of *Ragion di Stato*. The first is the ability of the prince to master knowledge in a way that allows him to mould the state – the kind of knowledge involved, and how he is to acquire and exercise such knowledge and mastery. The second theme is Botero’s declared preference for preservation of the state over political-military expansion. The author of *Ragion di Stato* is no friend of conquest and associates territorial and dynastic expansion with turmoil and instability.

The definition of *lo stato* as stable rule over people and the preference for preservation over expansion pick up and further develop already established lines of contemporary political debate. The emphasis on knowledge, on the other hand, shows a new awareness, a distinct edge. The term *notitia* already indicates a focus on recovery, organisation and application of specific information to practical political analysis and decision-making. It is evident throughout the book. The reader of *Ragion di Stato* will repeatedly encounter an understanding of reason of state as the shrewd and comprehensive exploitation of disparate sources of knowledge for the primary purpose of preserving the state. It comes to the fore, for instance, in the discussion of *prudenza* or practical reasoning. The discussion of prudence introduces and structures the argument of the second book of *Ragion di Stato* as a whole and is one of the occasions where Botero engages directly with the gathering, uses and conceptualisation of new forms of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> “Ragione di Stato è notitia di mezi atti à fondare, conservare, e ampliare un Dominio: (...)”, Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* (Venice: Gioliti, 1589), 1 [quoted: RS, book.chapter, page number]. I refer to the second edition published the same year by the same publisher, which includes *Delle cause*. For a critical edition, see Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato*, ed. Pierre Benedittini and Romain Descendre (Turin: Einaudi, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> RS, II.1-2.

Crucially, prudence is the term contemporaries associated most closely with ‘Tacitist’ or ‘Machiavellian’ conceptualisations of statecraft.<sup>15</sup> The term originated in Aristotelian *phronesis* and was by definition restricted to extracting precarious maxims and vague principles of conduct from invariably ephemeral, contingent and particular sources (such as human history or positive law). It recommended itself to those in search of a pragmatic political ethics because it described and epistemically rooted the kind of malleable knowledge necessary for involvement in the life of the polis. Many theologians, on the other hand, found the term highly problematic. *Prudentia* was not easily cast as a moral rather than intellectual virtue, and proved recalcitrant to their efforts to present it as concerning itself primarily with what is truly good for man as well as a rightful means to attain such goodness.<sup>16</sup>

On the whole, Botero conceptualises prudence in the Aristotelian vein as the intellectual rather than moral capability to define the means and ends of political conduct with a view to pragmatic outcomes.<sup>17</sup> It is “the virtue whose function is to seek and to find convenient means to bring about a given end”.<sup>18</sup> Prudence is the “eye of the ruler”. It provides “good counsel”, “draws up plans” and “gives commands” which “valour” [*valore*] – it’s complementary and equally practical virtue – then puts into practice. Prudence is the virtue that enables a counsellor or prince to

<sup>15</sup> Peter Burke, “Tacitism, scepticism, and reason of state”, in J.H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 479-98; Herfried Münkler, *Im Namen des Staates: Die Begründung der Staatsraison in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1987), especially 193-207; briefly, Harald E. Braun, *Juan de Mariana and Early Modern Spanish Political Thought* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 101-106. For Botero’s take on prudence specifically, see Höpfl, *Jesuit Political Thought*, 90-97.

<sup>16</sup> A comprehensive discussion of the history of moral decision-making in medieval and early modern theology is offered by Rudolf Schüssler, *Moral im Zweifel*, 2 vols. (Paderborn: Mentis, 2003, 2006); also Ilka Kantola, *Probability and Moral Uncertainty in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> See especially RS, II.1 (*Della Prudenza*), II.2 (*Delle scienze atte a affinar la Prudenza*), II.3 (*Della Historia*); II.8 (*De’ Consigli*).

<sup>18</sup> RS, II.8. The 1598 edition – the last revised by Botero himself – omits the following passage: “Primieramente debe egli far professione; non di astuto; ma di prudente; e la Prudenza è una virtù, il cui ufficio è cercare, e ritrovare mezzi convenienti, per conseguire al fine, e l’astutia tende al medesimo fine; ma differisce dalla Prudenza in, questoche nell’ellectione de’mezzi, quella segue l’honesto più che l’utile, questa non quien conto, se non dell’interesse.” [“First he must make a reputation for prudence [*prudenza*] rather than astuteness [*astutia*], prudence being a virtue whose function is to seek and to find convenient means to bring about a given end. Astuteness has the same object, but differs from prudence in this: in the choice of means, prudence follows what is honest rather than what is useful, astuteness takes nothing into account but interest.”]. By excising this traditional definition and differentiation between prudence and astuteness, Botero, arguably, strengthened the pragmatic and self-interested aspect of prudence evident elsewhere in his argument.

combine practical experience and theoretical knowledge in order to draw up well-considered, realistic plans and policies.<sup>19</sup>

The Piedmontese then goes on to sketch the “sciences which sharpen prudence”. This is where a shift of emphasis, a further broadening of the meaning of the term become increasingly noticeable as the discussion continues. The prince has to give priority to the acquisition of knowledge, especially “wide knowledge” of everything “that pertains to human feelings and behaviour”, methods of government and matters of war.<sup>20</sup> Mastering the art of war, for instance, requires in-depth knowledge of psychology as well as a range of sciences – geometry, architecture and engineering in particular. Throughout *Ragion di Stato*, accordingly, the argument puts the onus of “knowing many things” firmly on princes, and in fact defines the ruler as a person necessarily distinguished by unusually high competency in acquiring, ordering and applying information. While Botero quotes Vegetius to corroborate and anchor his claim that a ruler who excels in learning is likely to excel in ruling his subjects,<sup>21</sup> his demands go beyond the usual requirements. It becomes clear that Botero, the secretary, diplomat and tutor to princes, in fact demands that the ruler establish and master his own meta-discourse of all the arts and sciences.

The suggestion is not that the prince could or should aspire to excel as an engineer, a general, a painter and a scholar all at the same time. The prince is not *artifex* in the strict and narrow sense of being a maker, and he does not need the specialist knowledge of the makers. Some arts, Botero explains in his *Relationi del Mare* (1598), demand complete dominion over matter – architecture, sculpture, painting as well as those that make things out of wood, iron, wool or silk.<sup>22</sup> Their practitioners can define and achieve their ends by complete control over matter. Other arts such as agriculture and navigation, medicine, politics and warfare, however, lack comparable “dominion over matter”. The consequences for the relationship between the prince as artisan and

---

<sup>19</sup> RS, II.3; II.8.

<sup>20</sup> RS, II.2.

<sup>21</sup> Vegetius, *Epitomae rei militaris*, I, preface.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Botero, ‘Relationi del Mare’, in Id., *Aggiunte di Gio. Botero alla sua ragion di stato (...) Con una relatione del Mare* (Pavia: Andrea Viani, 1598), 1.



the state as his matter are twofold. On the one hand, it is the duty of the prince to master those many, diverse and disparate fields of knowledge to a degree and in ways that allow him to mould the state just as the artisan uses knowledge to shape and perfect matter. On the other hand, the knowledge needed to mould state and subjects has to be acquired, honed and sustained in a different way. It is an altogether different, more flexible, and in many ways expanded and differentiated kind of knowledge. Botero's prince will become artisan of his state only if he rises to the challenge of mastering new and superior kinds of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Botero does not capture this acquisition and mastery of knowledge specific to the prince in a single comprehensive definition, but in a semantic web of cognate terms: *notizia*, *cognizione*, *scienze* and *prudenza* are in many-layered relationships with specific disciplines and practices of knowledge like *eloquenza*, *istoria* or *secretezza*.<sup>24</sup> In part, the exposition is conventional. The future ruler must be educated, Botero says, so that he is not only receptive to recruiting able counsellors, but willing and able to accept and digest their advice. He makes much of the humanist topos of the ideal prince as one in constant conversation with the past (through books of history) and the present (through carefully selected advisors). From works of moral philosophy he will learn about the mind and human emotions. Works of political science will instruct him in methods of government. This kind of knowledge allows the ruler to make judicious use of people and their specific knowledge. While not able to build a bridge or cast a cannon, the prince will excel at making good appointments and distinguishing "the false and the good from the bad" across the many disciplines, and will thus be able "to choose the best of a number of alternatives".<sup>25</sup> Yet Botero also requires the prince to attain a meta-level of understanding and establish an overarching taxonomy or conceptual superstructure

---

<sup>23</sup> In the 1596 edition of *Ragion di Stato*, Botero inserted this notion into the first lines of the first, defining chapter of Book one: "Et la causa si é perché la ragione di Stato suppone il Prencipe e lo stato (quello quasi come artifice, questo come materie), che non suppone, anzi, la fondazione affatto." Descendre, *L'État du Monde*, 96-97, suggests that Botero's description of the prince as artisan of the state was a response to criticism and an attempt to stress the Aristotelian orthodoxy of his thought. I rather think Botero moulds the Aristotelian notion of *artifex* in order to draw readers' attention to the state-shaping potential of knowledge and the knowledge-mastering prince.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, *RS*, II.2 ('Delle scienze atte ad affinar la prudenza').

<sup>25</sup> *RS*, II.2, 50.

of all the disciplines and fields of knowledge necessary to govern a people. The prince is asked to develop and keep constantly present in his mind an overarching sense of the order of nature as a whole. Intellectual command of the natural order of reality, will allow him to impose similar order on his political and social environment.

The desire to widen the horizon of what is politically relevant knowledge extends to conventional attributes of the exemplary ruler and introduces a new slant, for instance, on eloquence as inextricably linked to prudence and reputation.<sup>26</sup> Eloquence, the author of *Ragion di Stato* explains, is about more than the ability “to calm a nation, win round the multitude, or soothe their passions”. While the ruler must be a gifted rhetorician, he will be able to speak persuasively only if he has full “comprehension of the works of nature, which underlie the works of man.” In fact, only the “knowledge of the disposition of the world” as a whole - from the qualities of the soul and the generation and corruption of matter to the properties of minerals, meteors and rainbows - will allow the prince to make and communicate decisions soundly and effectively. Botero requires the prince to master the early modern book of nature in full - including astronomy, biology, meteorology, botany, geography and geology – in order to become eloquent, increase his reputation, and arrive at mature decisions.

Botero changes the scope and outlook of the genre of mirrors-of-princes itself to such a degree that he effectively offers a new science of politics and the state. The emphasis on knowledge and individual command of knowledge retains the traditional focus on the prince and his counsellors, but at the same time transforms it in the light of new information and new categories of analysis that lead to a different outlook and new policies. There is, for instance, a genuinely paradigm-shifting focus on the economy and economic strategy as crucial to governing the territorial state. *Ragion di Stato* includes a chapter ‘On industry’ – lifted from the first edition of *Delle cause*

---

<sup>26</sup> See RS, II.2, 51-53.

*della grandezza delle città* published the previous year<sup>27</sup> – in which he sets out how the state must consider and nurture subjects as its prime source of wealth. The skills and qualifications of the population allow the government to turn base raw materials like iron into manufactured goods which sell at higher prices and offer a much higher tax yield.<sup>28</sup> Wealth is mined above ground as much as, and in fact much more than, below ground, and manufactured goods – nature perfected, value increased – rather than raw materials are the prime source of wealth of nations.<sup>29</sup> Just as the workman considers raw metal his *materia prima* and turns it into a thousand forms, so the “artful prince” will consider the skills, talents and knowledge of his subjects as a matter inviting his shape-giving efforts. “Such wealth is there in art and industry”, Botero posits “that neither the mines of silver, nor the mines of gold in New Spain nor in Peru, can be compared with it. And the duties on Milanese goods bring more money into the King of Spain’s coffers than the mines of Zacateca and Jalisco.”<sup>30</sup> The argument culminates in the celebration of Flanders as Charles V’s ‘true Indies’. Flanders, in Botero’s view, is ‘the real deal’, more valuable to the *hacienda* than the Habsburg territories in the new world.

The old Thomist adage that “art perfects nature” takes on a new meaning. The concept and practice of statecraft as *ars* and the prince as *artifex* now includes a more deliberate approach to entrepreneurial initiative, activity and planning on the part of government combined with a better understanding and increasing control of natural resources – natural resources understood as mineral wealth and agricultural produce as well as subjects’ labour, initiative and economic capacities. A kind of epistemic optimism – encapsulated in Botero’s understanding of prudence as well as his particular

---

<sup>27</sup> Originally conceived as chapter seven of the second book of *Delle cause della grandezza delle città*, later editions only include the title and a reference to Book VIII, chapter three of *Ragion di stato*. On kings and commercial activity see also *RS*, VIII.14.

<sup>28</sup> In *Le relazioni universali*, Botero further develops his take on the transformation of nature through art by interlocking geography, political constitution, national custom and economic resources to an unprecedented degree.

<sup>29</sup> Keller, “Mining Tacitus”, traces Botero’s use of the metaphor of “mining wealth above ground” and variations in later seventeenth-century economic thought. Keller, *ibid.* 192, rightly stresses that Botero “reinvigorated the belief that knowledge is power”, but still depicts him as primarily motivated by an “anti-Machiavellian” impetus. I argue that Botero’s recognition of knowledge technologies as crucial to governance and his enthusiasm for new kinds of information took him – and reason of state – well beyond Machiavelli, Tacitus, and “the cunning of Tiberius”.

<sup>30</sup> *RS*, VIII.3, 152.

use of the metaphor of the prince as *artifex* – underpins a new science of the early modern territorial state. Botero's prince in turn is a meta-polymath, a new kind of monarchical demiurge, and *Ragion di Stato* and subsequent works are meant to feed information and give direction to such a mind.

\*\*\*

When it comes to drawing out new sources and technologies of knowledge, Botero frequently mixes the old with the new. History takes pride of place in *Ragion di Stato*.<sup>31</sup> History allows the individual to transcend the limits of time and space. The prince must do everything he can to acquire experience – the “mother” of prudence – and do so either personally and directly, or indirectly by learning lessons from “the living or from the dead”. If the “lessons from the living” – ambassadors and spies, merchants and soldiers - already “embrace many places”, the “lessons from the dead” still go further and cover the entire history of every corner of the world. Historians (Tacitus, prominently), poets and philosophers provide the maxims of prudence and examples of good governance woven into the argument and listed in chapters six, twelve and thirteen of the second book of *Ragion di Stato*. Botero, then, wholeheartedly endorses the well-established humanist topos of *historia magistra vitae* and all its features. Yet he also extracts from the study of history the need to grow experience by thinking comparatively and globally, and throughout his treatise contrasts and appraises countries and cities with regard to the relationship between climate, geography, agriculture, transport, commerce and national character.<sup>32</sup>

The continual emphasis on comparison conjoins with the characteristic sensitivity towards knowledge, such as an awareness of physical space as integral to the politics of power and as a distinct category of political analysis. This sensitivity sharpens his observations, for instance, with regard to the submission, pacification and integration of conquered territories in book five of *Ragion di Stato*. There, he pays as much attention to the “ways to win the minds and the goodwill” of conquered peoples as to “humbling their spirit”, “decreasing their power”, and “preventing them

---

<sup>31</sup> See especially *RS*, II.3.

<sup>32</sup> A good example is *RS*, II.5.

from uniting” in order to forestall revolt. With regard to the latter, physical or spatial means include the forced relocation and dispersal of minorities or whole subject populations. Also, if a prince is confronted with a large and restless city, Botero advises that the population ought to be divided up into small villages and communication inhibited, for instance by separating these communities by means of large and wide ditches or walls.<sup>33</sup>

Even more importantly, awareness of the politics of space permeates the way in which Botero distils new ways of looking at well-established terms and topics such as lordship over land and people. Botero’s summary terms for territorial rule are *stato*, *dominio*, and *imperio*.<sup>34</sup> He distinguishes between small (*piccioli*), middle-sized (*mezani*) and large (*grandi*) as well as compact (*uniti*) and dispersed (*disuniti*) *dominii*. It is a testimony to his ingenuity that he defines *dominium* in large part as the relationship between relative size and spatial dispersal of the distinct territories that make up a lordship. The complexity of political geography is acknowledged as a possible yardstick for the territorial integrity and political stability of the early modern state. Over the course of subsequent chapters, Botero deepens his analysis, examining and comparing lordships past and present from the vantage points of political-constitutional and cultural diversity as well as economic performance. Throughout, there is a notable and persistent pre-occupation with political communication – the ways in which goods, people and ideas travel between states and in particular between the territories that make up a composite state (*dominio disunito*).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Giovanni Botero is the first to make a determined attempt at conceptualising in geopolitical terms the early modern composite or polycentric monarchy – a political formation made up of more than one political-territorial entity under the rule of one sovereign.<sup>35</sup> He captures this distinctive manifestation of early modern dynastic statehood in his

---

<sup>33</sup> RS, V.7, 155-56.

<sup>34</sup> RS, I.2, titled *Divisione de Dominii*. Unlike scholastic theologians like Vitoria or lawyers like Bodin, Botero did not concern himself with the conceptualisation of the origins and legitimacy of political bodies. He sought to grasp political reality in its fullness and develop the tools to shape that reality. He did not seek to differentiate a term beyond what he thought was needed to understand the politics of power.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of terminology, see the classic article by John H. Elliott, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies”, *Past and Present* 137 (1992), 48-71; also the introduction and contributions in Pedro Cardim,

description of some of them as *grandi* [territorially expansive] and either *uniti* [constituent parts are geographically contiguous] or *disuniti* [constituent parts separated from one another by other states or the sea].

Early modern observers such as Francesco Guicciardini saw the centrifugal dynamic of a composite monarchy as largely dependent on the degree of *conformità* – the level of contiguity or conformity between the different kingdoms or principalities united under one ruler with regard to language, laws and institutions.<sup>36</sup> Botero adds a physical and geographical dimension to the discussion. His initial supposition is that the larger the composite polity and the more distant and separated from one another its main territories, the more inherently unstable it is and liable to suffer revolt, invasion and eventual disintegration.<sup>37</sup> The gradual agglomeration of distinct *dominii*, he says, inevitably results in severe over-stretch of military and political resources. The dynastic components that make up such conglomerates can usually be “acquired a little at a time”, but “must all be preserved together as a whole”.<sup>38</sup> Obstacles rooted in geographical distance and exacerbated by political and cultural diversity turn the preservation of larger *dominii* into “an almost superhuman undertaking”.

This sombre indictment of the early modern composite monarchy in *Ragion di Stato* is indebted in parts to Aristotelian moral taxonomy – namely, the idea of virtue as the mean between the extremes, as control of desires and absence of excess – and, perhaps, echoes Erasmian humanist pacifism. The agglomeration of distinct states into a composite monarchy, Botero states, is the result of greed, ambition and envy as well as a “foolish desire” for “novelty”, “wonders” and “excitement”. Romans, Ottomans, and more recently Spaniards, Botero claims, have been particularly susceptible

---

Tamar Herzog, José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez and Gaetano Sabatini (eds). *Polycentric Monarchies* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Elliott, “Composite Monarchies”, 52.

<sup>37</sup> The core of the discussion in RS, I.5 (*Qual sia opera maggiore l’aggrandire ò conservare uno Stato*); 6 (*Quali Stati siano più durabili, I grandi, I piccioli, ò i mezani*) and 7 (*Quali Stati siano più durabili gli uniti, ò i disuniti*).

<sup>38</sup> For instance, RS, I.5, 6.

to those vices – vices which inspire and are in turn fanned by conquest.<sup>39</sup> Invariably, large composite monarchies or empires are subject to a vicious cycle of moral and political corruption, and from the moment of triumph merely feed off “past reputation rather than present resources and qualities”. The hallmark of such large and fragile agglomerations is that they disintegrate almost from the point at which they peak in terms of territorial acquisition, and possibly even before.

Botero, however, does not conclude his argument concerning large composite polities on this note. First, he offers a possible solution. Then, he changes the vantage point entirely and brings new categories of analysis to bear on the subject. The possible solution to the inherent instability of large, fragmented political structures is again cast in terms of Aristotelian ethics: any *dominium*, just like any individual, has to aspire to *mediocritas* and exercise moderation. For the individual, such virtue is its own reward. *Lo stato*, on the other hand, is compensated with stability, peace and longevity. Botero praises compact and middle-sized powers, such as Sparta, Carthage and Venice, over large and dispersed empires like Rome and the Spanish Habsburg monarchy. The Republic of Venice is his model, illustrating the complementary relationship between “mediocrity of power” and “stability”, “strength” and “durability”.<sup>40</sup>

Yet Botero’s own categories of political analysis - inspired by a concomitant sense of the reality and the potential of contemporary geopolitics – make him query and revise his own pre-conceptions about empire as well as established nomenclature. The outpouring of moral disdain concerning empire is followed by calm assessment and the acknowledgement of the opportunities of global monarchy. Again, the discussion is inspired by contemporary politics, and, again, the Spanish Habsburg monarchy serves as a principal point of reference.<sup>41</sup> In a seminal passage, Botero

---

<sup>39</sup> The discussion of the “causes of the downfall of states” in chapter four of book one of *RS* is in large parts conventional. The emphasis is squarely on “internal corruption” (*cause intrinseche, intrinsecamente, interne*), such as inexperience or ineptitude on the part of the ruler.

<sup>40</sup> *RS*, I.6, 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> On the enthusiastic and sustained reception of Botero in Spain, see Xavier Gil, “Las fuerzas del rey: la generación que leyó a Botero”, in M. Rizzo, J.J. Ruiz Ibáñez and G. Sabatini (eds.), *Le forze del principe. recursos, instrumentos y límites en la práctica del poder soberano en los territorios de la Monarquía Hispánica* (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2004), Vol.2, 969-1022; also José Antonio Martínez Torres, “‘There is but one world’: Globalisation and connections in the overseas territories of the Spanish Habsburgs (1581-1640)”,

shows himself unencumbered by moralistic phlegm about great powers invariably succumbing to internal corruption. Instead, he differentiates his argument, and states that:

“[a] dispersed empire is either split up in such a way that the various parts are unable to give aid to each other because strong powers which are openly or potentially hostile stand between them, or else mutual aid is possible (...).<sup>42</sup>

Such “mutual aid” can be delivered in the form of financial subsidies, agreement or alliance with the states through which help must pass, or “when all the ports of an empire lie on the sea and have naval forces to defend them.” If all or at least some of these conditions are met, Botero suggests, even a “scattered empire is as secure and lasting as a compact one”. Of the three ways to connect the parts of a dispersed empire, Botero considers the sea and a strong navy as most likely to sustain communication and transfer of funds and troops, and thus secure territorial-political integrity.

He does not simply turn his previous argument on its head. Botero again notes that “the parts of a scattered empire [can be] so weak that they cannot stand alone or defend themselves against their neighbours”. He stresses again that empires are always liable to fall victim to internal corruption – the late Roman Empire and an exhausted Spain falling to the Goths and Moors respectively serve as historical case studies. All the same, he still cautions that a “scattered empire is [likely to be] weaker than a compact one, because the distance between the ports is always a source of weakness” if the major ports themselves are vulnerable to enemy attack or do not have the means to bring timely aid to one another.

The overall conclusion, however, is that a potent naval force and infrastructure can sustain even a large and scattered empire. This is the case for a number of reasons, he argues, including the difficulty even for a host of enemies to co-ordinate assaults on the ports and keystones of maritime

---

*Culture and History Digital Journal* 3.1 (2014),  
<http://cultureandhistory.revistas.csic.es/index.php/cultureandhistory/article/view/44/169>; accessed 19 February 2016.

<sup>42</sup> RS, I.7, 11: “Gli Stati disuniti, ò sono divisi tra se di tal maniera, che non si possono soccorrere l’uno l’altro; perche hanno in mezo Principi potenti, ò nemici, ò sospetti: ò si possono soccorrere.”



empire, and the fact that baronial and popular revolt are less likely to spread from one territory to another and are more easily subdued. Naval power and infrastructure, again, are most likely to prevail if a dispersed empire is made up of a number of middle-sized powers strong enough to defend themselves even against powerful neighbours.

Botero describes the empire of Philip II of Spain as made up of powerful and distinct, yet dynastically and economically closely aligned entities, like the Spanish Netherlands, the kingdom of Sicily, or the duchy of Milan. Although “a considerable distance apart”, these territories support one another by means of funds, goods and troops speedily moving via ship or along the “Spanish Road” from Milan to Flanders. The recent union of Portugal and Castile (1580) serves as a further proof. The union, he says, affirmed the maritime outlook of the government of Philip II, and strengthened the naval power of the enlarged Iberian monarchy. Even with hindsight – the union would eventually disintegrate and Portugal break away from Spain in 1668 after more than twenty years of war – Giovanni Botero’s analysis retains its intellectual freshness and geopolitical acuity.

The discussion of composite monarchy or empire exemplifies Botero’s eye for the dynamics of contemporary politics as much as his sense for the physical dimension of global politics. A distinct and discriminating awareness that oceans and waterways are arteries of power and communication, an acknowledgement of the fact that communication in all its aspects is integral to political power pervades his work. It forms an important part of his discourse on urbanity and urban planning in the slightly earlier *Delle cause della grandezza delle città*, too. The treatise explores the reasons for the foundations and growth of cities. Botero identifies *utilità* as the principal cause of the “greatness of cities”.<sup>43</sup> Utility, according to Botero, is “not a simple thing, (...) a single form, but assumes different forms and manners”, and certainly includes the convenience (*commodità*) of a site in terms of commerce, agriculture, and, crucially, in terms of ‘convenience of transport’ (*commodità della condotta*).<sup>44</sup> The latter is a matter of optimal access to oceans, lakes and navigable rivers, rather than

---

<sup>43</sup> DC, I.7.

<sup>44</sup> I follow the translation offered by Geoffrey Symcox: Giovanni Botero, *On the Causes of the Greatness and Magnificence of Cities*, transl. and introd. By Geoffrey Symcox (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012).

roads. In his discussion of why some rivers are more navigable and serve as arteries of commerce more than others, he even probes the physical properties of water – speed, depth and consistency – and establishes them as parameters of comparison. His understanding of water being able to carry heavy or light loads as depending on its level of “thickness” or “sliminess” is hardly the stuff of modern hydrology. The discussions of the physical, political and economic properties of water and the sea do, however, typify both the level of detail and comprehension he seeks to offer his readers as well as his ambition and ability to bring previously separate fields of knowledge into meaningful conversation.<sup>45</sup>

\*\*\*

Botero adds new perspectives, analytical categories and sources of information to the notion of reason of state. While it still includes proficiency in political subterfuge, it is much more about mastery of specific fields of knowledge and comparatively large amounts of data recognised as integral to formulating a strategy for preserving the state. Correspondingly, he understands political prudence – the virtue at the very centre of early modern reason of state - primarily as the rational capability to identify, gather and process information with a view to ensuring pragmatic outcomes.

Niccoló Machiavelli, unsurprisingly perhaps, is only one point of reference for Botero, and not one that gives direction to the argument of *Ragion di Stato* as a whole.<sup>46</sup> In the dedication of his treatise to Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau, Prince Archbishop of Salzburg and relative of the Borromeo family, Botero chastises Machiavelli for his lack of conscience and censures Tiberius (and, implicitly, Tacitus) for his cruelty and tyranny. The tone of moral outrage, however, is not borne out by the argument that follows.

---

<sup>45</sup> While the first edition of *Della Ragion* did not include *Della cause della grandezza*, the second edition, also published in 1589, and almost every edition thereafter did. Botero clearly wanted to alert readers to the symbiotic relationship of the two works. Paradoxically, the fact that they were commonly published together appears to have put *Delle cause* into a subordinate and marginal position. The originality of Botero’s turn to economics, urbanisation and demographics was noted by Luigi Firpo and leading twentieth-century sociologists, but largely ignored in the debate on the relationship between reason of state, Machiavellianism, and anti-Machiavellianism.

<sup>46</sup> For a succinct and compelling discussion of Machiavelli and (anti-)“Machiavellianism” in *Ragion di Stato*, see Höpfl, *Jesuit Political Thought*, especially 90-97.

Botero eagerly mined Tacitus for political strategy, and found a lot to recommend in Tiberius. When he does pan the infamous Florentine, he does so mainly with a view to exposing what he perceives as a distinct lack of political instinct and contemporary relevance rather than a lack of conscience. He takes particular umbrage at Machiavelli's failure to appreciate the religious dimension of politics. He decidedly disagrees, for instance, with the Florentine's analysis of the Ottoman state. Botero identifies the Ottoman empire and heresy as the two enemies constantly imperilling the spiritual and political peace of Christianity.<sup>47</sup> The discussion of simulation, dissimulation and secrecy, on the other hand, is pragmatic and permissive. He approves of the controversial maxim *qui nescit (dis)simulare, nescit regnare*. Princes need to dissimulate in order to keep their plans secret, he states, and he makes no effort to make the difficult distinction between *simulatio* and *dissimulatio*. He simply considers outright lying and breach of treaties and promises as highly detrimental to princely *riputazione* and to maintaining healthy relations with allies. The emphasis is firmly on pragmatic rules of political engagement, especially on mutual trust and respect as the cornerstone of working political relationships, political cohesion and stable rule. His approach mirrors his preoccupation with balance of power within and between territorial states as a desirable goal. Botero's exposition of the means and stratagems deployed to suppress or destroy heretics - including secret tribunals and pre-emptive massacre - is as icily 'Machiavellian' as anything his fellow Jesuits and other scholastics could have written. From Botero's vantage point at the end of the sixteenth century, Machiavelli was outmoded and much of what he had to say did not stand up to scrutiny in a political environment determined by European religious civil war and the global expansion of Christendom.

Botero takes the prevalence of political self-interest simply as a given. He does not accept that the means and ends of *conservare lo stato* are incompatible with the dictates of Christian

---

<sup>47</sup> See especially his observations on the legitimate use of military force against Christian, infidel and heretical enemies - "Contra chi si debbano voltar le forze" - in *RS*, X.9. This discussion is added as the ultimate chapter of the whole treatise to the third, revised edition of 1590: Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato* (Rome: Vincenzo Pellagallo, 1590), 314-19. On Botero and the Ottoman empire, see Enzo A. Baldini, "Botero et Lucinge: les racines de la Raison d'État", in Zarka, *Raison et déraison d'état*, 67-99.

religion and morality - certainly not for Catholic princes struggling to contain heretics and the Turk. 'Machiavellian atheism', on the other hand, fails on political as well as spiritual grounds. While no casuist himself, Botero could take it as a given that scholastic theologians - Jesuit casuists not least - offered the conscience of Catholic princes pragmatic ways of dealing with ethically problematic choices.<sup>48</sup> Instead, he has his mind firmly trained on pragmatic analysis of what does and what does not work in contemporary politics rather than moralist concerns and casuist disquisition. Where he disagrees with Machiavelli, this is largely "a disagreement between experts who spoke the same language".<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, Botero frequently chose to speak an altogether different political idiom, one that identified hitherto neglected knowledge as key to political stability and economic growth.

\*\*\*

Botero's thinking and writing during the later 1580s and 1590s reflect his ambition together with his personal situation and employment. As secretary *cum* counsellor to the Borromeo cardinals, he wanted to provide his masters with something we today might call geo-political roadmaps. He acts as a one-man-think-tank, offering the kind of information and analysis that would enable the archbishop of Milan to assess opportunities and threats in a fluid political environment, make long-term strategic plans and well-informed decisions. If we read *Ragion di Stato* with the eyes of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, it does indeed read like the kind of roadmap that would help situate the church of Milan in relation to the papal state, the duchy of Milan and other Italian states, the Spanish Habsburg monarchy, universal Christendom, and the world beyond *Christianità*.

Underlying and to some degree transcending Botero's concern with Catholic universalism, then, is a lifelong and evolving interest, a systematic endeavour even to recast the language, sources and organisation of political analysis and political counsel. Botero's objective - and a trait that

---

<sup>48</sup> On the relationship between moral theology and political advice during the early modern period see now Nicole Reinhardt, *Voices of Conscience: Royal Confessors and Political Counsel in Seventeenth-Century Spain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Also the contributions in Harald E. Braun & Edward Vallance (eds), *The Renaissance Conscience* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe 1500-1750* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004). For the later seventeenth century, Jean Pascal Gay, *Jesuit Civil Wars: Theology, Politics and Government under Tirso Gonzalez (1687-1705)* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Höpfl, *Jesuit Political Thought*, 97.

connects *Ragion di Stato* to his later works - is to merge traditional wisdom concerning good governance and the virtues of the prince with new, hitherto neglected fields of knowledge immediately relevant to contemporary politics. Run-of-the-mill Aristotelian political taxonomy is modified in order to be able to make new information available and enable new approaches to challenges and problems of government. There is a tangible and acute sense of the forces shaping the increasingly complex reality of early modern politics and governance, forces previously ignored: the territorial state as defined by political geography, population, agriculture, commerce and urbanity as well as confessional conflict and a new universality of the Catholic Church reflecting the reality of the New World. Throughout, the author of *Ragion di Stato* is spurred by what he identifies as a clear and pressing need to rethink the *kind* of information and the *way of thinking* needed for making informed political decisions.

Botero's decision to consider *lo stato* the central category of early modern politics brings with it a new understanding of knowledge in politics and a new urgency to define the sources and delivery of political counsel. Consequently, the ex-Jesuit can be read and understood alongside political analysts and civil servants like Juan de Ovando (c.1515–1575) as much as Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean Bodin and Justus Lipsius. Botero accumulates and integrates humanist and scholastic modes of enquiry with new, scientific forms of knowledge. Juan de Ovando's reforms introduced profound changes to the relationship between information and decision-making in Spanish imperial government, initiating, for instance, the first comprehensive survey of the governance, geography and ethno-linguistic make-up of the Americas (the famous *Relaciones geográficas*, collected c.1578-c.1586).<sup>50</sup> Giovanni Botero's political oeuvre shares and in large parts

---

<sup>50</sup> Ovando is a key figure in the history of Spanish imperial administration; see Stafford Poole, *Juan de Ovando. Governing the Spanish Empire in the Reign of Philip II* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). For knowledge management in the Spanish Habsburg monarchy more widely, Arndt Brendecke, *Imperium und Empirie. Funktionen des Wissens in der Spanischen Kolonialherrschaft* (Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 2009); Antonio Barrera, *Experiencing Nature. The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); David C. Goodman, *Power and Penury. Government, Technology and Science in Philip II's Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and the helpful essay by Mauricio Nieto Olarte, "Scientific Practices in the Sixteenth-Century Iberian Atlantic", in Harald Braun and Lisa Vollendorf (eds), *Theorising the Ibero-American Atlantic* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 141-58.

conceptualises a thirst for new kinds of empirical knowledge as the life-blood of good governance. He exemplifies and in many ways co-pilots the empirical turn in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century political science and scientific endeavour.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> On reason of state, scientific cultures of knowledge and empiricism in sixteenth century intellectual history, see the literature in footnotes 10 and 29 above; for political thought in particular, Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State. The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics (1250-1600)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).